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SUBJECT: RAMADAN SHAMMY: LATE NIGHT GOSSIP ON THE ECONOMY,
SOAP OPERAS, AND INTERNATIONAL CONSPIRACY

REF: DAMASCUS 949

Classified By: MICHAEL CORBIN FOR REASONS 1.5 B and D.

¶1. (C) Summary: While attending to our day jobs, Embassy staff tried (in vain) to keep up with a rigorous late night Syrian Ramadan social calendar. Despite SARG efforts to scare Syrians away from our events and to deter others from inviting us to theirs, we held three successful Embassy Ramadan gatherings, attended the Grand Mufti's Iftar, and showed up for a wide range of other social and religious outings. Based on a sampling of views expressed by regular contacts, social acquaintances, and random individuals overheard sounding off, we believe Syrians this year are most preoccupied with price increases and an uncertain economic future. Syrians are also enthralled with this year's special Ramadan TV programming. We continue to hear (and try to rebut) a large number of conspiracy theories regarding U.S. policy in the region. We see more restaurants and cafes serving food and drink during the day, reflecting what some see the continuing strong influence of Syria's multi-faith population. More visible this year, Iraqis residing in Syria are openly celebrating their own Ramadan customs. End Summary

Late Night Eating For Our Country

¶2. (SBU) Like Muslims around the world, most Syrians slow their daily activities during Ramadan to reflect the shift to nocturnal events. In most Damascene neighborhoods, the dusk call to prayer fades and the momentary silence of deserted streets fills quickly with the sound of clattering dishes, as Syrians of all ranks and ages gather to break the day's fast. By midnight, the ornately-lit streets, cafes, and restaurants of old Damascus are usually brimming with people of all faiths and ages, who stay out as late as 0400 or 0500, playing cards and backgammon, drinking tea, smoking shisha, and talking.

¶3. (C) Despite heavy government pressure on our invited guests to stay away, the Embassy successfully hosted two Iftars and a large, well-attended late evening reception (Sahoor), and our A/DCM was an honored guest at the Grand Mufti's Iftar. Our presence at these and a variety of other evening social events provides a taste of Ramadan color here.

The Economy is Issue 1

¶4. (SBU) Mid-day and after-dark business is brisk in most parts of the city, although neighborhood shopkeepers, restaurant managers, and downtown merchants report a downturn in sales (roughly ten percent) compared to the previous year.

"People like to look," one clothing vendor told us, "but everyone is waiting for bargains." Indeed, traffic is fiercest in the city's market areas between the hours of 1100 and 1500, and then between 2200 and 0200, as Syrians compress their social and errand outings into intense four-hour bursts.

15. (SBU) Virtually no Iftar or Sahoar progresses far before the subject of Syria's economy arises. Specifically, Syrians of all social classes are complaining volubly about price gouging by merchants during the holy month, particularly during the first ten days of Ramadan. Numerous sources have explained that a seasonal price hike is an annual ritual, but this year's has been so egregious that the SARG tasked prominent Imams to address the subject during their Friday sermons. As we observed in numerous cafes, the quiet mention of prices for basic staples can quickly turn into a high-volume comparison among tables of complete strangers. The occasional visitor from Beirut, Istanbul, or Amman may offer perspective on the higher prices in their cities. But the local flavor of the discussion inevitably returns, as shopping parties appear to plan the next days' outings based on this vital information.

16. (C) Related to prices is the popular subject of wages, which remain under pressure, especially for government workers. The government's decision to award government employees a Ramadan bonus of 50 percent of one month's salary eased some burdens and provided a psychological relief to families worried about making ends meet. But next year poses great uncertainties, particularly for pensioners and fixed-income employees. As one business contact explained to us between midnight puffs on a water pipe, the government is under constant pressure to offset price increases with wage increases. During Ramadan, he added, religious donations

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help to offset this pressure, as do an increase in remittances from abroad (estimated to be 14-18 million USD additional this month).

17. (C) Another issue under frequent discussion is the Syrian government's on-again, off-again approach to reducing subsidies for diesel fuel and other goods (reftel). Most Syrians demonstrate a nuanced grasp of how an increase of diesel fuel prices will be passed on to the consumer in the form of higher prices for basic goods and agricultural products. At a recent Embassy-hosted event, three separate groups representing a mix of businessmen, human rights activists, and artists were overheard discussing the challenges of maintaining and reducing these subsidies. Participants were unable to identify any magic policy solutions, but most found themselves on the side of the people who depended on the price supports and against the smugglers, who were profiteering in bordering countries at the expense of Syria. The government scored mixed ratings, positively by looking out for those less fortunate, and negatively for neglecting investment in infrastructure and education that might one day transform Syria's economy.

Did You See....

18. (SBU) As are many Arab countries, Syria is buzzing with comments about this year's collection of special Ramadan mini-dramas and documentaries appearing on local and satellite TV stations. The most popular show is the Syrian-produced "Bab al Hara," a program that follows the life of a Damascene neighborhood during the early 1900s and highlights the themes of honor, religion and patriotism. "This is a show that explains the Syrian identity," suggested one regular contact, who urged a group of Arabic language students attending the Embassy's Sahoar to study it with their teacher in order to master the Syrian dialect. "No," a female journalist interjected, "Bab al Hara represents a

sentimental search for better times in the past." Fifteen minutes later, the subject of conversation had not changed.

¶9. (SBU) Another popular series, "King Faruk," is directed by a Syrian, and the Syrian star playing King Faruk reportedly landed the role after agreeing to a lower wage demanded by an Egyptian actor. This series has sparked a broad range of commentary about the sympathetic treatment of King Faruk's final years on the throne. One prominent Syrian commentator has lauded the show's effort to correct distorted images of Faruk as a extravagant womanizer who sacrificed his country for lust and greed. He explains that Arab history texts have pilloried Faruk when the true record shows a different picture. "Yes, he committed mistakes, but so did Nasser and other Arab leaders who should be held to the same standard," he said to an Emboff on the margins of an Iftar. Others disagreed. "It (the program) blames others when history rightly blamed him" for Egypt's defeat in the 1948 war against Israel, asserted a gallery owner who attended the Embassy's Sahoar. "History is more complicated," argued another Sahoar guest, who said it was easy to scapegoat individuals in the name of politics.

¶10. (SBU) Similarly, the al-Arabiya documentary on Egyptian President Gamal al Nasser has evoked a wide range of opinion on the leader's role in the Arab-Israeli conflict. According to one journalist, the documentary persuasively documents Nasser's ultimate desire to avoid war with Israel, but he was unable inability to outmaneuver those in his government who pushed Egypt over the brink.

Iraqi Ramadan

¶11. (C) The subject of 1.5 million Iraqis living in Syria remains controversial. Most of our social contacts tend to refrain from overtly criticizing Iraqi refugees, as doing so during Ramadan would contradict the holiday's focus on charity and forgiveness. But they are quick to point to the relationship between rising real estate and other costs and the refugee issue. A recent Ramadan trip to the neighborhood of Jerimanah, which has become home to thousands of Iraqis, revealed a vibrant evening Iraqi community. Against a backdrop of a new Syrian visa requirement that will limit the number of Iraqis entering Syria and may affect the status of those residing here, we observed Iraqi families in the streets and markets, socializing, shopping, and enjoying the night air. Cafes and restaurants serving Iraqi specialty

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dishes were full, and the atmosphere festive. This contrasted with a more somber air in nearby Syrian quarters, in which shops were open, but the pace was less brisk. Our Iraqi Syrian Orthodox guide pointed out the distinct Iraqi cultural influence in the area, which had spread across entire neighborhood blocks. "This is what Baghdad used to be like," he said.

International Conspiracy Theories

¶12. (C) No snapshot of Ramadan in Damascus would be complete without mention of swirling conspiracy rumors involving U.S. policy in the region, which we find ourselves rebutting with alarming regularity. Israel's air incursion into Syria on September 6 provided a ready-made segue for many Syrians to accuse America of backing Israeli aggression.

In one typical exchange, a female university student attending an Embassy Iftar for new Fulbright Fellows pressed this point forcefully on Emboffs, arguing that American policy was enabling Israel to bully its Arab neighbors with impunity. Concluding with an assessment of U.S. policy toward Lebanon, this student accused Washington and Jerusalem of killing anti-Syrian politicians in Lebanon. "Why would we

do this to ourselves?" she asked.

¶13. (C) At a different venue, a prominent Syrian analyst argued there remains a natural affinity between the Syrian and Lebanese people, but many Syrians took offense when Lebanese March 14 politicians blamed Syria in general for the assassination of former Lebanese PM Rafiq Hariri. "To this day," he continued, "my wife goes crazy whenever Saad Hariri appears on TV, and she makes me turn it off." That sentiment reflects what many Syrians see as the hypocrisy of Lebanese politicians who readily blame Syria for all of Lebanon's woes and then cut deals with Hizballah so they can attain power, he said.

¶14. (C) Days after the U.S. Senate had passed a resolution supporting the division of Iraq into three parts, several journalists confided to us at an Embassy event that many Syrians saw the resolution as proof of America's desire to Balkanize the Arab world to reduce resistance to Israeli policies. Most of those listening to the conversation politely nodded in response to our critique of the Senate resolution, but their body language made clear that they deeply suspected U.S. motives.

¶15. (C) In hushed tones, two close Embassy contacts explained later that night that President Asad faces under-the-breath criticism from Syrians on a wide range of domestic and foreign issues. The majority of Syrians, however, will back him when he faces Western pressure and isolation. As evidence, they cited how Syrians rallied around Bashar in 2005 when the international community politicized the UN's investigation of the Hariri assassination. They also noted the popularity of Bashar's decision to condition Syria's attendance of any international peace discussions on the inclusion of the Golan on the agenda. "Bashar increases his popularity when he can show the Syrian public he won't let the U.S. push him around," commented a well-connected businessman, turning around from another group to interject into our conversation.

¶16. (SBU) While these controversial subjects are a reminder of what lurks below Ramadan's pageantry, most Syrians appeared eager to steer conversations about politics back to more pleasant topics. After a lengthy awkward pause following a heated exchange on U.S. policy in a crowded outdoor cafe, one Embassy contact suggested Syrians were more eager to traffic in conspiracy theories during Ramadan because they spent so much more time in front of the TV. Laughing, someone else in the group acknowledged the popularity of crazy ideas during Ramadan, noting "anything goes so long as no one dares to suggest ending the night early."

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